

IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT NATIVE AMERICANS

The arrival of white people quickly changed Native American life. A wave of explorers, settlers, and traders swept over the Americas. Some tried to understand the Native Americans and live peacefully with them, but many wanted only riches and land. Most of the whites thought themselves better than the Indians and tried to force them to assimilate with the whites. When the Indians resisted, fighting broke out. The western tribes of the Great Plains, the last to succumb, were overcome, according to historian Mary Beth Norton (*A People and A Nation*, pp.473-74) by "political and ecological crises. Decline of buffalo herds, poverty caused by enemy raids that carried away their crops, disease, and military force combined to bring subsistence culture to the point where the Indians were willing to yield their lands to market-oriented whites."

In the early days of this republic the new government made numerous treaties with the Indians. In signing these treaties, the various tribes agreed to keep peace with the settlers and to recognize the jurisdiction of the U.S. government. Each tribe gave up much of its territory and kept only a part of it for its own use, retaining the rights to the natural resources on this land, as well as the fishing and hunting rights there. The Native Americans had little understanding of private land ownership, and so a tribe sometimes gave away land that belonged to other tribes. In return for the land Native Americans surrendered, the federal government promised cash payments and protection. In most cases, the government also agreed to supply the Indians with livestock, manufactured goods, and medicine.

Under the U.S. Constitution, these treaties with the Native Americans were as legally binding as the agreements the government made with other nations. But many of the treaties were broken as settlers entered lands set aside for the various tribes. Numerous wars resulted. In 1824 the U.S. government set up the Bureau of Indian Affairs, under the jurisdiction of the War Department, to deal with Native American problems. In 1849 this bureau became part of the Department of the Interior.

EVENTS in NATIVE AMERICAN HISTORY

1824: Bureau of Indian Affairs established

1829: The Cherokees, under Chief John Ross and backed by sympathetic whites but not President Andrew Jackson, turned to the federal courts to defend their treaty with the United States and prevent Georgia's seizure of their land.

1830: Indian Removal Act: To free more eastern lands for settlement this act allowed President Jackson to move the eastern tribes to lands west of the Mississippi River. Between 1830-1840 over 70,000 Native Americans were removed.

1831: Cherokee Nation v. Georgia: Chief Justice John Marshall ruled that under the federal Constitution an Indian tribe was neither a foreign nation nor a state and therefore

had no standing in federal courts. Nonetheless, said Marshall, the Indians had an unquestioned right to their lands. They could lose title only by voluntarily giving it up.

1832: Worcester v. Georgia: John Marshall more clearly defined the Indian position. The Indian nation was, he declared, a distinct political community in which "the laws of Georgia can have no force" and into which Georgians could not enter without permission or treaty privilege. President Andrew Jackson simply ignored the Supreme Court's ruling.

1832: End of Black Hawk War: Suspicious of white intentions from the start, Sauk and Fox braves from Illinois and Wisconsin, ably led by Chief Black Hawk, resisted eviction. They were bloodily crushed in 1832 by regular troops, including Lieutenant Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, and by volunteers, including Captain Abraham Lincoln of Illinois.

1835-1842: Seminole War: In Florida the Seminole Indians, joined by runaway black slaves, retreated to the swampy Everglades. For seven years they waged a bitter guerrilla war that took the lives of 1500 soldiers and proved to be the costliest Indian conflict in American experience. In 1837 the spirit of the Seminoles was broken when the American commander treacherously seized their leader, Osceola, under a flag of truce. Four fifths of the Seminoles were eventually moved to present day Oklahoma where about 3,000 of the tribe survive.

1838-39: Trail of Tears: The U.S. Army forcibly removed about 15,000 Cherokee Indians, some of them in manacles, from their ancestral homelands in the southeastern U.S. and marched them to the Indian territory in Oklahoma. Freezing weather and inadequate food supplies led to horrible suffering. Some 4,000 Cherokees died on the 116 day journey.

1848: The discovery of gold in California brought more settlers west.

***1851 and 1853: Treaties of Fort Laramie and Fort Atkinson:** These treaties marked the beginning of the reservation system in the West. They established boundaries for the territories of each tribe and attempted to separate the Indians into two great colonies to the north and south of a corridor of intended white settlement.

1860: Reservation Policy intensifies: In the 1860s the federal government herded the Indians into still smaller confines, principally the "Great Sioux reservation" in the Dakota Territory, and the Indian Territory of present day Oklahoma, into which dozens of southern Plains tribes were forced. "The Indians surrendered their ancestral lands only when they had received solemn promises from Washington that they would be left alone and provided with food, clothing, and other supplies. Regrettably, the federal Indian agents were often corrupt. They palmed off moth-eaten blankets, spoiled beef, and other defective provisions on the friendless Indians. One of these cheating officials, on an annual salary of \$1500, returned home after four years with an estimated "savings" of \$50,000." (Citing Bailey, Thomas. *The American Pageant*. p. 600.)

1864: Sand Creek Massacre: At this encounter Colonel J.M. Chivington's militia massacred in cold blood some 400 Indians who apparently thought they had been promised immunity. Women were shot praying for mercy, children had their brains dashed out, and braves were tortured, scalped, and unspeakably mutilated.

1868-1890: Incessant Warfare Between Whites and Indians: Many of the regular U.S. troops were veterans of the Civil war. A disproportionate number of them were immigrants. U.S. troops also included four crack black units, including the famous Tenth Cavalry. About 1/5 of all soldiers assigned to the frontier during these years were black men attracted to steady monthly pay and the opportunity to escape limited options at home.

1869: Completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad signaled the beginning of the end for the Native Americans in the west. Four more transcontinental r.r.s followed. The Native Americans fought fiercely to keep their homelands but were finally defeated. The U.S. government placed the various tribes on isolated reservations that were located throughout the West.

1871: Indian Appropriations Act: Congress ruled that tribes were no longer separate, independent governments. This action freed the government from the need to make treaties with the Native Americans. It also placed the various tribes under the guardianship of the U.S. Government and intensified the reservation process. Problems with life on reservations for the Indians included the facts that 1) Indians had no say over their own affairs on reservations; 2) it was impossible to protect reservations from white farmers, miners, and herders who continually wanted more and more land; and 3) the government disregarded variations among tribes, even concentrating tribes habitually at war with each other on the same reservation.

1876: Battle of the Little Big Horn: In 1874 Colonel George Armstrong Custer led a "scientific" expedition into the Black Hills of South Dakota (part of the Sioux reservation) and announced that he had discovered gold. Hordes of greedy gold-seekers rushed to the Dakota Territory. The Sioux went on the warpath led by chiefs such as Sitting Bull. Colonel Custer's Seventh Cavalry set out to suppress the Indians and to return them to the reservation. Attacking what turned out to be a superior force of some 2,500 well armed warriors camped along the Little Big Horn River in present day Montana, Custer and his men were completely wiped out in 1876 when two supporting columns failed to come to their rescue. The Indians who defeated Custer were relentlessly hunted and crushed in a series of battles across the northern plains over the next several months.

1877: Warfare with the Nez Perce Indians of Idaho: Gold discoveries on the Nez Perce reservation prompted the federal government to shrink its size by 90 percent. Chief Joseph, pursued by General Oliver Otis Howard, led his 700 followers on a tortuous 1,700 mile three month trek across the Continental Divide toward Canada. There the Nez Percés hoped to rendezvous with Sitting Bull, who had taken refuge across the border after the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Betrayed into believing they would be returned to

their ancestral lands in Idaho, the Nez Perces instead were sent to a dusty reservation in Kansas, where 40 percent of them perished from disease. The survivors were eventually allowed to return to Idaho. Surrendering in 1877, Chief Joseph declared, "*Our chiefs are killed. . . The old men are all dead. . . The little children are freezing to death. . . I want to have time to look for my children. . . Hear me, my chiefs. My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever.*"

1881: *A Century of Dishonor* written by Helen Hunt Jackson: Jackson was a writer and advocate for Indian rights. This work was one of the first to advocate more humane policies toward Native Americans, but at the same time it advocated assimilation of Native Americans into white culture. Ms. Jackson became interested in Indians after moving to Colorado with her second husband. Although Jackson did a good deal of research for this work, she really understood little about Indian culture. Her subsequent novel about California Indians, *Ramona* (1881), was a greater popular success. The following is a quote from *A Century of Dishonor*: "This Congress could cover itself with the luster of glory as the first to cut short our nation's record of cruelties and perjuries - the first attempt to redeem the U.S. from the shame of a century of dishonor!"

1880s: Indian Reform Organizations Begun: The two most important Indian reform organizations were the Women's National Indian Association (WNIA) and the Indian Rights Association (IRA).

- 1) The WNIA, a social feminist group, urged gradual assimilation of Indians and sought to extend women's domestic virtues to the public sphere rather than seek political rights.
- 2) The IRA supported citizenship and landholding by individuals.

Both groups believed that Indians were culturally inferior to whites and assumed that Indians could succeed economically only if they adopted middle-class values of cleanliness, diligence, monogamy, and education. In other words the Native Americans needed to **assimilate**. With government encouragement, white missionaries and teachers would attempt to persuade Native Americans to adopt values of the new American work ethic: ambition, thrift, and materialism. In order to comply, Indians would have to abandon their traditional cultures.

1884 and 1886: Supreme Court Decisions: These decisions denied Indians the right to become United States citizens, leaving them unprotected by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which had, on paper, given blacks rights of citizenship.

1887: Dawes Severalty Act: intended to break up tribal lands into small property units (40-160 acres) to be given to individual Indians. Lands that remained after the distribution were sold to whites. Native Americans were promised eventual American citizenship. U.S. Indian policy now took on three main features:

- 1) Land was distributed to individual families in the belief that they would acquire white peoples' wants and values by learning how to manage their own property.

2) Bureau officials believed that Indians would lose their "barbaric" habits more quickly if their children were removed and educated in boarding schools far away from the old reservations.

3) Officials provided money for white church groups to establish religious schools among the Indians and teach them to become good Christians.

Civil War veteran and long time Indian fighter General Philip Sheridan (1831-1888) who said "*the only good Indian is a dead Indian*," reflected on the wars against the Indians:

"We took away their country and their means of support, broke up their mode of living, their habits of life, introduced disease and decay among them, and it was for this and against this they made war. Could anyone expect less?"

1890: Battle of Wounded Knee: Officials of the Bureau of Indian Affairs tried to suppress what they believed were dangerous Indian religious ceremonies. When the "Ghost Dance" cult spread to the Dakota Sioux the government sent the Seventh Cavalry, Custer's old regiment, to stamp it out and apprehend some Sioux who were believed armed for revolt. During an encounter at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota, the troops trained newly acquired cannon on the Indians and massacred 200 sick and hungry men, women, and children in the snow.

The Indian spokesman Plenty Coups said in 1909:

*I see no longer the curling smoke rising from our lodge poles.
I hear no longer the songs of the women as they prepare the meal. The antelope have gone; the buffalo wallows are empty. Only the wail of the coyote is heard. The white man's medicine is stronger than ours. . . We are like birds with a broken wing."*

1924: Indian Citizenship Act: gave American citizenship and full voting rights to every Native American born within the territorial limits of the U.S. Native Americans who continued to live on reservations continued to pay all federal and state taxes, but paid no taxes on reservation land and property.

***1934: Wheeler-Howard Indian Reorganization Act:** This act, which was part of the New Deal, stopped the further loss of Native American reservation land. It also encouraged reservation Indians to take a more active role in managing their own internal affairs by providing for limited self-government through tribal councils elected by the adults of a tribe.

1953: Termination Policy begun: In 1953, Congress passed a resolution that called for ending federal support and protection of certain reservation Indians as rapidly as possible. A number of tribes voted in favor of termination, though many did not fully understand what was involved. In most cases, termination took place too quickly and with too little

preparation for independence. Growing opposition to the policy caused the government to abandon it.

Late 1960s: Indian Power movement began.

1970s: Self Determination Revived: During the 1970s the Bureau of Indian Affairs revived a policy called self-determination. The policy was established by the Wheeler-Howard Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 but had been largely ignored. Under self-determination, many tribes assumed control of their own schools, law enforcement, and other activities.

1972: American Indian Movement (AIM) and other Indian rights groups carried out a protest against the Bureau of Indian Affairs by occupying its headquarters in Washington, D.C. Their members called for stronger government action against job and housing discrimination.

1973: Return to Wounded Knee: AIM members seized the village of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, to call public attention to Native American complaints. They demanded the return of lands taken from Native Americans in violation of treaty agreements. Four F.B.I. agents were killed.

Late 1970s: Legal battles were begun to recover lands taken by whites

1) Passamaquoddy and Penobscot tribes in Maine sued to recover about 12 million acres. In 1980 they agreed to drop their lawsuit in exchange for an 81.5 million dollar settlement from the federal government.

2) In 1980, the Supreme Court of the U.S. ordered the federal government to pay 122.5 million dollars to eight tribes of Sioux Indians. The money was payment for Indian land in South Dakota that the government seized illegally in 1877.

3) In 1982 the Supreme Court ruled that tribes can tax the production of oil, natural gas, and other minerals on reservations.

U.S. Native American Population:

1492: 1,000,000 (estimate)

1887: 350,000

1980: 1,400,000

Buffalo Population:

1865: 15,000,000

1885: under 1,000

Bibliography:

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